When Death Doesn't Take A Holiday

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross Discusses Facing the End of Life

by DAVE PATRICK HAYWARD

Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, the woman who transformed the way people die in the West, is no stranger to controversy. Accustomed to receiving brickbats as well as hosannas wherever she goes, Kübler-Ross has long followed her calling to "push people's buttons." And that's exactly what she'll be doing July 8, when Kübler-Ross celebrates her 64th birthday by opening a 40-bed facility for the terminally ill at her farm in Head Waters, Va. Since moving her headquarters to this secluded country hamlet, Kübler-Ross has been under attack by neighbors who abhor her "importing" AIDS into their mountain preserve.

A Swiss citizen, Kübler-Ross graduated from medical school at the University of Zurich in 1957. She and her husband moved to the United States the following year. After earning a degree in psychiatry at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, she began to counsel terminally ill people in Denver and Chicago.

In 1969 she wrote *On Death and Dying*, which promptly revolutionized treatment for the dying and bereaved. Kübler-Ross's concept of five stages of dying—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—soon entered the standard vernacular at hospitals, seminaries, and graduate schools of psychology worldwide.

Since 1974, over 1,405 hospice programs designed to help the terminally ill live and die at home have sprung up around the country—"like Chicken Delights," says Kübler-Ross with maternal pride. But her work, which she has described in nine subsequent books, has recently come under critical attack. *Psychology Today* finds her "fundamental Christianity existing in odd combination with New Age spirituality," and *Christian Century* criticizes her "intolerably questionable research" and "regression to fantasy." Her message today offers an unusual mix of metaphysics and medicine—a far cry from the agnostic attitudes she held before investigating the end of life.

In 1987 Kübler-Ross published *AIDS: The Ultimate Challenge*. The book, recently released in paperback, received mixed reviews, although many AIDS support programs across the country continue to follow her philosophies.

Kübler-Ross, who is currently a clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Virginia, continues to lead her five-day "Life, Death, and Transition" workshops in cities around the world. Back home, she carries on with her efforts to care for babies with AIDS, even after being refused permission to construct an AIDS hospice on her farm.

A wiry woman who stands five feet tall and chain-smokes, Kübler-Ross appears frail and nondescript until she speaks up and reveals the considerable strength of her convictions. Even when talking about the most serious of matters, she exhibits a winning sense of humor. Here's what she has to say to *The ADVOCATE*.

What are some of the objections to your new center?

Well, the county has demanded a sewer system—just for 40 people. There are hundreds of thousands of cattle and sheep who pee in the meadows, but for 40 people you need a quarter-million-dollar sewer system! They say, "You don't know if when cancer patients urinate [the cancer] doesn't go into the sewer system and then into the community." They can't be honest and say it's AIDS [they're objecting to]. There are hundreds of cancer patients in my county, and they don't contaminate the sewer system. But we are not so easily intimidated.

Have you reached any sort of détente with your local community?

They still shoot bullets through my windows. Most of them belong to the chaff rather than the wheat. They say, "She's a woman who tries to import AIDS into our county." It's hopeless, and to fight that

would be a total waste of energy because they would only become more negative, and negativity feeds on negativity.

So I told them I can wait—I'm not in a hurry. I can do good work in any other county. I'm not forced to do my work in Highland County. My immediate neighbors are lovely.

I understand you're having some success with helping babies with AIDS.
I have two babies that were born with AIDS, and they now test negative. In this decade, [I think we can speculate] that about 10% of all babies born HIV-positive will become negative and will live to an old age. The only criterion is they have to get out of hospitals and institutions as fast as humanly possible.

But I cannot get a single AIDS baby out of a hospital, because it's a big business, it's too lucrative. They get $1,000 a day for each child in a hospital. They get research money to experiment with AZT and all that stuff. Then they have to give the babies bone marrow once a week, then blood transfusions because they get anemic from the AZT. Those children just end up staring into space after two or three years in an institution.

How do you account for the two babies testing negative?
The recipe is they have to be marinated in love. You can't have that in a hospital. A nurse, doctor, or anybody in a hospital may love these children. But they come in, pinch the baby's cheeks, say, "Hi, sweetie," and then take off. There is no bonding.

Children who are born to an HIV-positive mother carry the mother's HIV-positive antibodies. But if from age 6 months to 12 months the babies are marinated in love and have a positive life environment, then they begin to get rid of the mother's antibodies and begin to develop their own. At least 10% will have a chance to live a normal life. We've started an organization to find homes for these AIDS babies.

Gay men have been devastated by AIDS. What do you have to say to them?
They have to learn to live without fear, shame, and guilt. If they can get rid of whatever unfinished business they have—and they have a lot—then they can become the loving beings we're all created to be. Then they can be strong and healthy. This is true for every human being. But gay men have plenty [of unfinished business], which makes them much more vulnerable to any illness, not just AIDS.

So many people have died and are dying, it's created a horrible vacuum in gay life.
It does leave a vacuum, and it's very sad, but it has helped [many people] to grow much faster than they would have grown otherwise. If everything's hunky-dory and without any challenges, you don't grow. Remember the saying of my organization: "Should you shield canyons from the windstorms, you would never see the beauty of their carvings." Look at these people! What beautiful, gorgeous people they have become after they've gone through suffering.

This is a time for separating the wheat from the chaff. I'm sure [people with AIDS] have been a catalyst for that. The AIDS epidemic forces all of mankind to take a stand. Are you going to make your choices built on fear and discrimination, hate and negativity? Or are you going to open your eyes and realize that we're all brothers and sisters coming from the same God?

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Are you saying we shouldn't mourn then?
You can't tell somebody you should not mourn, because you'll get your teeth bashed in. And you would deserve it! They should mourn and cry, but they should also be happy. Those who have died are often in a super place. They're at peace; they have no more pain, no more agony or conflicts. And they have made an enormous contribution by helping in this separation of the wheat from the chaff.

Do you think it's possible to communicate with people who have died?
It depends on what state they are in. When you leave your physical body and you're out of your cocoon, you're in a stage where you have no more consciousness, no more vital signs, but you're not dead yet. In that state, people who are on the way out have all awareness—*all*, because they know what people who drive by the scene of the accident are thinking. They also know what people who came to the hospital too late—after the person has "died"—are thinking.

And people who are on the way out can think about anybody in the world, and with the speed of their thoughts, they are there. They have the most wonderful dialogues, and the [living] can understand every word. The people who are left behind, if they are not spiritually evolved, have no idea that [these dialogues are possible].

How can you be so certain there is an afterlife and what it is like?
Well, I collected 20,000 cases of near-death experiences before I had my own. Then I had my own, and, God, it's 10,000 times better than anything I had collected.

I've been there, and I know the peace and the love that surround you are indescribable. You cannot put it into words. And it's true that you sow what you reap. If you have been a schnook and you have been horrible, if you have been nasty and you have been egocentric, then you end up in a different mansion than somebody who has dedicated his life to love and service. That is what is meant when it's said there are many mansions [in heaven]. There are billions of possibilities.

Your own thought processes create the reality. If you believe [the afterlife] is going to be gorgeous and that you will meet all those you have loved and lost, you will have a happy reunion with those people. But if you believe in hell and brimstone and eternal whatnot, then you will create that reality.

Love and positives are always stronger than negatives. That's why we help people to finish their unfinished business here, so they don't end up in a place that they created with their fears.

You try to get people to release as much fear as possible before they die?
Yeah! Shame, fear, and guilt are the only enemies of man—absolutely the only enemies. If you're a bucket of love, it [death] is totally, unbelievably beautiful and peaceful. The moment you look at the light, you begin to move toward the light. It is so peaceful; it's like falling into a water bed of love. ■